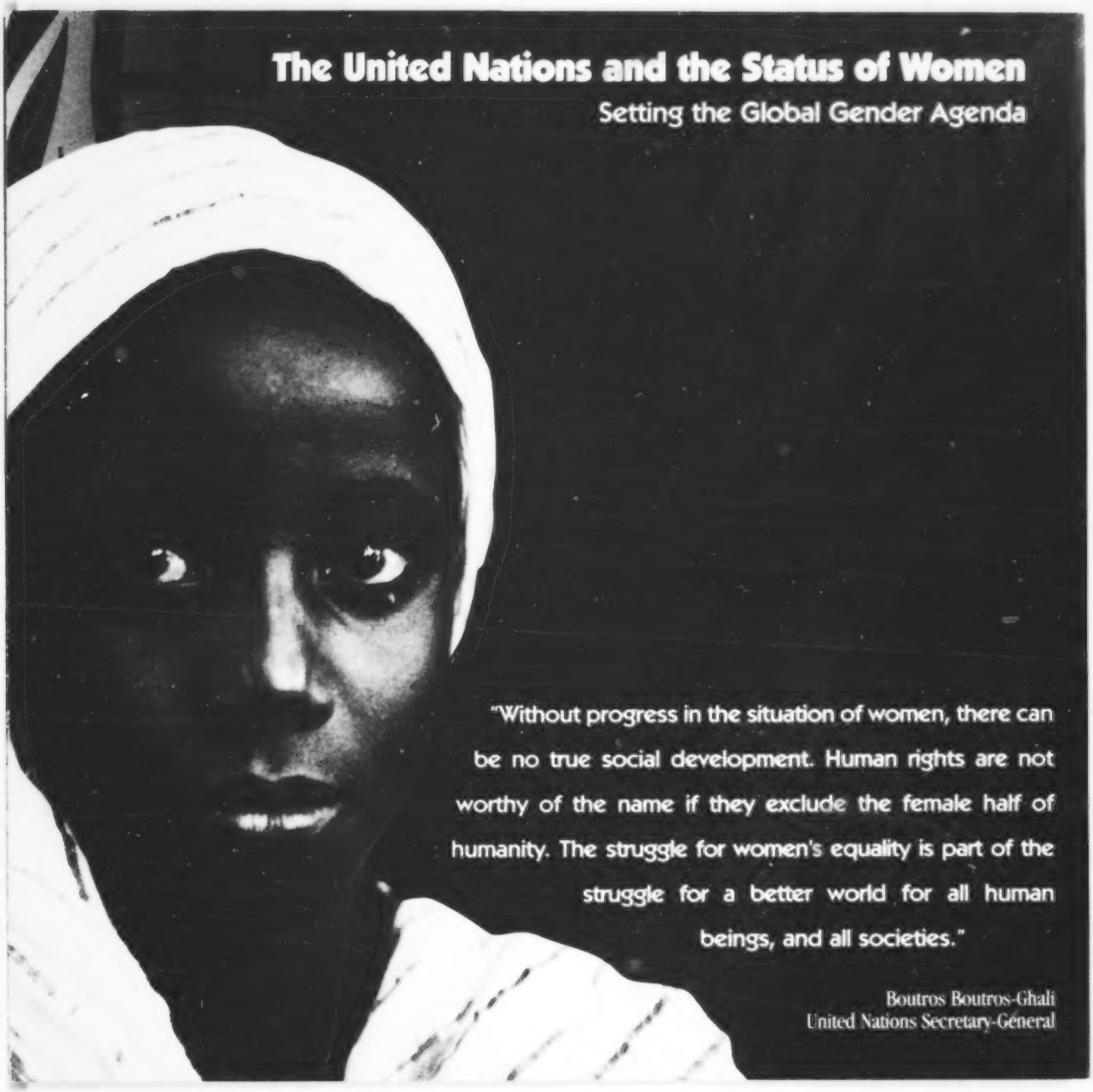

The United Nations and the Status of Women
Setting the Global Gender Agenda
"Without progress in the situation of women, there can be no true social development. Human rights are not worthy of the name if they exclude the female half of humanity. The struggle for women's equality is part of the struggle for a better world for all human beings, and all societies."
Boutros Boutros-Ghali
United Nations Secretary-General

UN Actions for Women

UN actions for the advancement of women began with the signing of the UN's founding Charter. In its Preamble, the members of the UN declared their faith "in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small...."

This happened 50 years ago, in October 1945, when the Charter entered into force and the UN was formally set up. Since then, the UN has been at the centre of a growing global movement for women's rights. By adopting international laws and treaties on women's rights, the UN has helped set a common standard for measuring how societies advance equality between men and women.

The Conventions, or international treaties, that the UN has adopted are legally binding for countries that recognize them. Among such treaties are:

- The Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952)
- The Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (1957)
- The Convention on Recovery Abroad of Maintenance (1956)
- The Convention on the Consent to Marriage (1962)
- The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)

The UN observed 1975 as International Women's Year and held the first world conference on women in Mexico City. Subsequently, two other UN conferences were held: Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985). The Fourth World Conference on Women will be held in Beijing, China in September 1995.

The Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the year 2000, adopted at the Nairobi Conference, is a blueprint for women's advancement. Its 372 paragraphs deal with the entire spectrum of women's role in society. In Beijing, the countries of the world will review the advancement of women in light of these guidelines. They will also adopt a Platform for Action, addressing the challenges and demands of the next century.

In December 1993, the UN adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, which defined what constitutes violence against women and outlined actions Governments and communities should take to prevent such acts. Earlier, in June 1993, the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, Austria, reaffirmed that women's rights are also human rights. One of the outcomes of the Conference was the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women. The Rapporteur, who seeks and receives information on violence against women, its causes and consequences, and recommends means and ways to eliminate them, reports to the UN Commission on Human Rights.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. Consisting of a preamble and 30 articles, it defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination.

According to the Convention, discrimination against women is "... any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field."

By recognizing the Convention, States commit themselves to undertake a series of measures to end discrimination against women in all its forms, including:

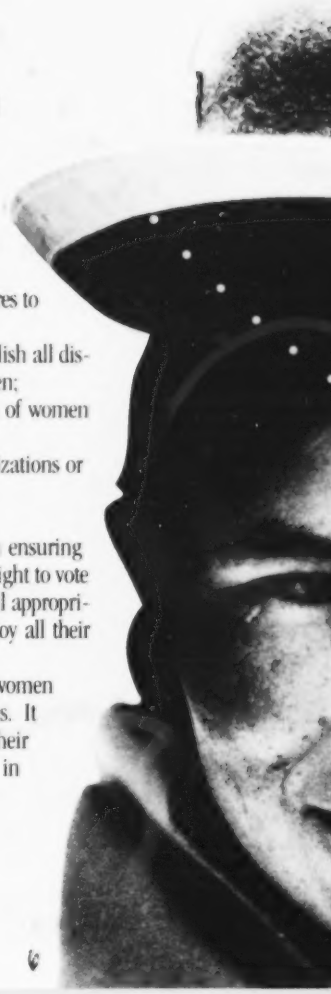
- To incorporate the principle of equality of men and women in their legal systems, abolish all discriminatory laws and adopt appropriate ones prohibiting discrimination against women;
- To establish tribunals and other public institutions to ensure the effective protection of women against discrimination; and
- To ensure elimination of all acts of discrimination against women by persons, organizations or enterprises.

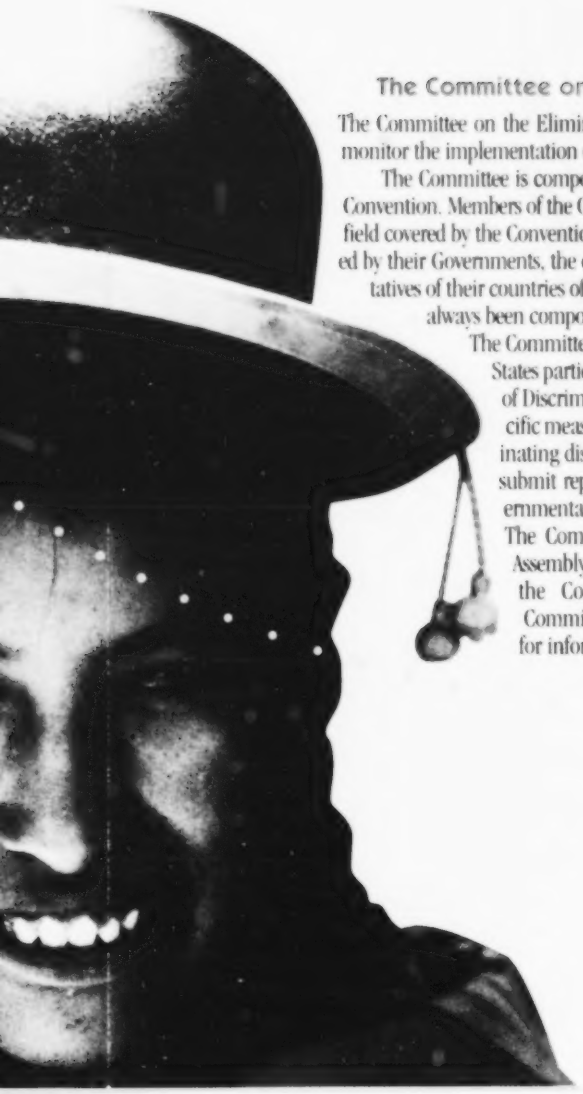
The Convention provides the basis for realizing equality between men and women through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life – including the right to vote and to stand for election – as well as education and employment. States parties agree to take all appropriate measures, including legislation and temporary special measures, so that women can enjoy all their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The Convention is the only human rights treaty which affirms the reproductive rights of women and targets culture and tradition as influential forces shaping gender roles and family relations. It affirms women's right to acquire, change or retain their nationality and the nationality of their children. States parties also agree to take appropriate measures against all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of women.

Countries that have ratified or acceded to the Convention are legally bound to put into practice its provisions. They are also committed to submit national reports, at least once every four years, on measures they have taken to comply with their treaty obligations.

The Convention, which entered into force on 3 September 1981, has so far been accepted by 139 UN Member States.





The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was set up in 1982 to monitor the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

The Committee is composed of 23 experts, who are elected by those countries that have ratified the Convention. Members of the Committee, who are persons "of high moral standing and competence in the field covered by the Convention", serve for a term of four years and may be re-elected. Though nominated by their Governments, the experts serve in their individual capacities and not as delegates or representatives of their countries of origin. Since its inception, and with only one exception, the Committee has always been composed entirely of women.

The Committee, which convenes once a year for a three-week period, reviews the reports of States parties on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and evaluates the progress made. It can suggest specific measures as well as make general recommendations to the States parties on eliminating discrimination against women. It may also invite UN specialized agencies to submit reports for consideration and may receive information from non-governmental organizations.

The Committee reports annually on its activities to the General Assembly through the Economic and Social Council, and the Council transmits these reports to the Commission on the Status of Women for information.

The Commission on the Status of Women

The Commission on the Status on Women (CSW) is one of the first bodies established by the UN Economic and Social Council. Set up in 1946, it monitors the situation of women and promotes their rights in all societies around the world. It prepares recommendations and reports for the UN on any issue affecting women. In case of urgent problems, the Commission can press for immediate international action to prevent or alleviate violations of women's rights.

In other words, CSW is the global advocate for equality between women and men.

The Commission, an intergovernmental body, has 45 members, each elected for four years. The membership of the Commission reflects the following geographical composition: 13 States from Africa, 11 from Asia, 4 from Eastern Europe, 9 from Latin America and the Caribbean and 8 from Western Europe and other States. The Commission meets annually for a period of at least eight days.

The central part of CSW's work involves setting universal standards regarding equality between women and men. It has also assumed a leading role in bringing women's concerns to the attention of the UN specialized agencies. Various UN Conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, have set new standards in the area of human rights. Over the years, the Commission has dealt with issues such as women's participation in political life and in decision-making, and women's role in and contribution to development. It has put forward policy recommendations regarding women's rights in employment and in education, and their role in the economy and the environment. It has made recommendations on how to support women in their fight against poverty. Its work with regard to violence against women led to the adoption of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women by the General Assembly in 1993.

CSW initiated the observance of International Women's Year 1975 and the world conferences on women. Following the adoption of the Forward-looking Strategies in Nairobi at the third UN conference on women in 1985, the Commission has also been responsible for monitoring the implementation of these strategies.

In Beijing, at the Fourth World Conference on Women (September 1995), the Commission will present the review and appraisal of the Nairobi Strategies. Both CEDAW and CSW are serviced by the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) of the Department of Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development. DAW also acts as secretariat for world conferences on women. The Division carries out policy research and monitors implementation of programmes of action taken at world conferences on women. It maintains regular outreach with NGOs and academic and national institutions working for women's advancement. It is also the focal point for coordination of activities for women in the UN system as a whole.

Women in Development

The need for integrating women in the development process was placed on the international agenda in 1975, when the UN observed International Women's Year. Among the many concrete steps taken in this regard after the 1975 world conference on women was the creation of two UN bodies, UNIFEM and INSTRAW.

A result of the energetic advocacy of women at the first world conference on women, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1976 to provide direct support to development projects for women. Originally set up as the Voluntary Fund for the Decade for Women, the Fund was asked to help improve the living standards of women in developing countries by addressing their concerns through providing direct technical and financial support and by promoting the inclusion of women in the decision-making process of mainstream development programmes. In 1985, the Fund became an autonomous body in association with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and was renamed UNIFEM.

Sometimes described as a bridge between international organizations, policy makers and disadvantaged women, UNIFEM is an aid to and advocate for women of the developing world. Currently, UNIFEM works at the country level through its 10 regional offices. Among its priority areas are trade and industry, credit, science and technology, agriculture and food security, and policy-making and national planning. It also targets critical issues on the global agenda to ensure that gender is included in international policies such as those related to refugees and displaced persons, violence against women, human rights, global governance and environment. UNIFEM has recently established a woman's human rights programme aimed at strengthening the capacity of women's organizations that work on human rights.

The United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), established in 1975 by the General Assembly on the recommendation of the first world conference on women, is an autonomous body within the UN system with a mandate to carry out research, training and information activities worldwide to promote women as key agents for sustainable development.

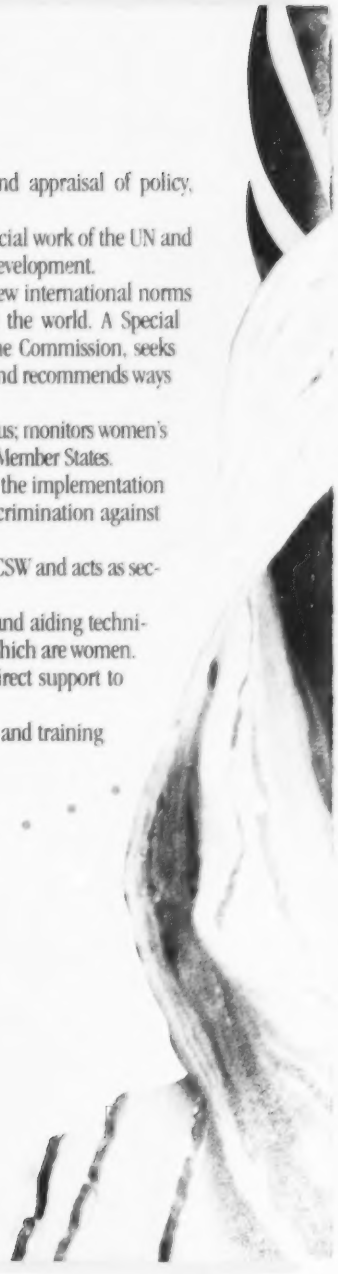
Operating from its headquarters in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, the Institute performs research projects to identify barriers that impede women's equality in the process of social, economic and political development. INSTRAW analyzes existing research material by interacting and working with Governments, UN agencies and academic institutions, as well as non-governmental organizations and other entities.

INSTRAW's experience has proved that the greatest problem affecting women is invisibility. With this purpose, INSTRAW develops new ways of understanding, new methodologies and statistics for training programmes and methods linked to issues such as:

- Economic empowerment;
- Collection of statistics and indicators on women's work in the formal and informal sectors;
- Availability of statistics on elderly women;
- Women and time-use;
- Statistics on women in the informal sector in industry, trade and services;
- Migration of women and the methodological issues involved in the measurement and analysis of internal and international migration;
- Women, water and sanitation and women and water management;
- New and renewable sources of energy;
- Women and environmental management;
- The role of women in environmentally sound and sustainable development;
- The image and participation of women in alternative and mass media;
- Gender and development studies, including training material.

The UN System and Women's Status

General Assembly:	Highest intergovernmental body for the formulation and appraisal of policy, including rights of women and related issues.
Economic and Social Council:	Principal UN organ for coordinating the economic and social work of the UN and its specialized agencies, including the role of women in development.
Commission on Human Rights:	Main UN body on human rights; develops and codifies new international norms and monitors the observance of human rights around the world. A Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, appointed by the Commission, seeks and receives information on violence against women and recommends ways and means to eliminate it.
Commission on the Status of Women:	Main UN body dealing with policy decisions on women's status; monitors women's situation and prepares recommendations for the UN and its Member States.
CEDAW:	A committee of 23 international experts set up to monitor the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.
DAW:	A division within the UN Secretariat: services CEDAW and CSW and acts as secretariat for UN conferences on women
Specialized agencies and programmes:	Members of the UN system; play key role in stimulating and aiding technical cooperation for development, the key beneficiaries of which are women.
UNIFEM:	Autonomous body in association with UNDP; provides direct support to women's development projects.
INSTRAW:	Autonomous body within UN system; undertakes research and training activities for the advancement of women.



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